

The  
Heritage of the Modern Printer  
by  
Margaret Bingham Stillwell

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MARGARET BINGHAM STILLWELL

Stillwell?

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# The Heritage of the Modern Printer

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MARGARET BINGHAM STILLWELL



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## THE HERITAGE OF THE MODERN PRINTER

THE "Revival of Printing," which began about twenty-five years ago, came at a time when the art of bookmaking had become so commercialized, in the haste and competition of the nineteenth century, that it had practically forfeited its right to be termed an Art. The movement is, therefore, most appropriately called a "Revival" for it was started in the endeavor to print modern books equal in beauty and in workmanship to the noblest products in the history of printing.

The invention of movable type in the middle of the fifteenth century was an innovation which did not at the time materially affect bookmaking as an Art. Through generation after generation of painstaking effort the scribes and illuminators had achieved a perfection in bookmaking which has never been surpassed. The early printers did not have to grope their way along. As scholars and as men of literary tastes they were already familiar with some of the most beautiful books which the world has ever seen. It remained for them to adapt the new invention to standards already well established. The monumental works issued from their presses bear witness to their success, but competition was not lacking in their work. There was the keenest rivalry between the transcribers and illuminators on the one hand, and the printers of movable type on the other. It was a long struggle, and until the art of printing had finally superseded that of manuscript making, the printers were forced to prove themselves capable in every way of living up to the standards maintained by those skilled craftsmen who so zealously fought for the continuance of their trade. When it was over, competition of another sort arose — between the printers themselves — and this competition gave rise to the practice of economy in time and in material. Former standards were swept aside in industrial struggle and there began a process of deterioration which, with a few exceptions, was continuous in its growth until well toward the end of the nineteenth century.

By the end of the eighteenth century Caslon type, which, in its straightforward way, had lent something of charm to English printed books, was already out of style. Shaded letters after the manner of a certain specie of penmanship, first introduced by Baskerville, became the fashion in type, and for purposes of economy in space these letters were re-cut from time to time in narrower and taller founts. Title-pages, if not actually engraved, were printed in type designed to look like copperplate. The accepted method of



beautifying a book was by interleaving it heavily with plates, on the apparent theory that the more plates the more beautiful the book. In 1844, however, the younger Whittingham revived the Caslon type in his work at the Chiswick Press and reintroduced ornamental initial letters in the text, such as had been used in books of the sixteenth century. Both he and William Pickering, the publisher, used their own good sense, neither following the past in servile imitation, nor allowing themselves to be bound to the fashion of the day. Although Chiswick books from that time had a certain influence upon contemporary printing, they did not effectually turn the tide. Type, in general, became more evenly tinted, to be sure, and ornamental letters and headbands were used as decorations. But the latter soon degenerated into meaningless type ornaments of rococo origin. Occasionally, books of a higher order were issued. The Rev. C. H. O. Daniel, for instance, issued some genuinely attractive little books at his private press in Oxford, and Mr. Herbert P. Horne and Selwyn Image together published in the late-eighties a magazine, called "The Hobby-Horse," in which especial care was given to the printing. The real impetus to the revival of fine printing came in the establishment of the Kelmscott Press in 1891. Horace Walpole, a hundred years before, had attempted to produce beautiful books, in limited edition, at his Strawberry Hill Press. His standards of beauty were according to those of his day. William Morris first tried to produce beautiful books at the Chiswick Press. Failing to satisfy his own ideals, he cast off stereotyped methods, and set himself the task of producing modern books according to the standards of the master printers of the fifteenth century.

The establishment of the Kelmscott Press was the culmination of three factors in Morris's own personality — his appreciation of the noblest of human thoughts as expressed in literature and in art; his interest in the practical working out of certain industrial ideals; and his passion for the creation of the Beautiful. He had struggled with British commercialism for years. He had attacked various crafts one after another, and had demonstrated that, in each case, industrial changes for the better were possible. Through socialism he had sought to establish conditions in which Art could live. His aim was industrial revolution through reform, and it was only when an aggressive policy was adopted that he withdrew his support from the Socialistic party. To him, the various crafts were closely allied, because each was but another method of expressing Beauty, and he was as much the master of one craft as of another. In his trades of interior decorator and printer, he was both workman and designer; as a writer, he was poet, essayist and translator. In what-

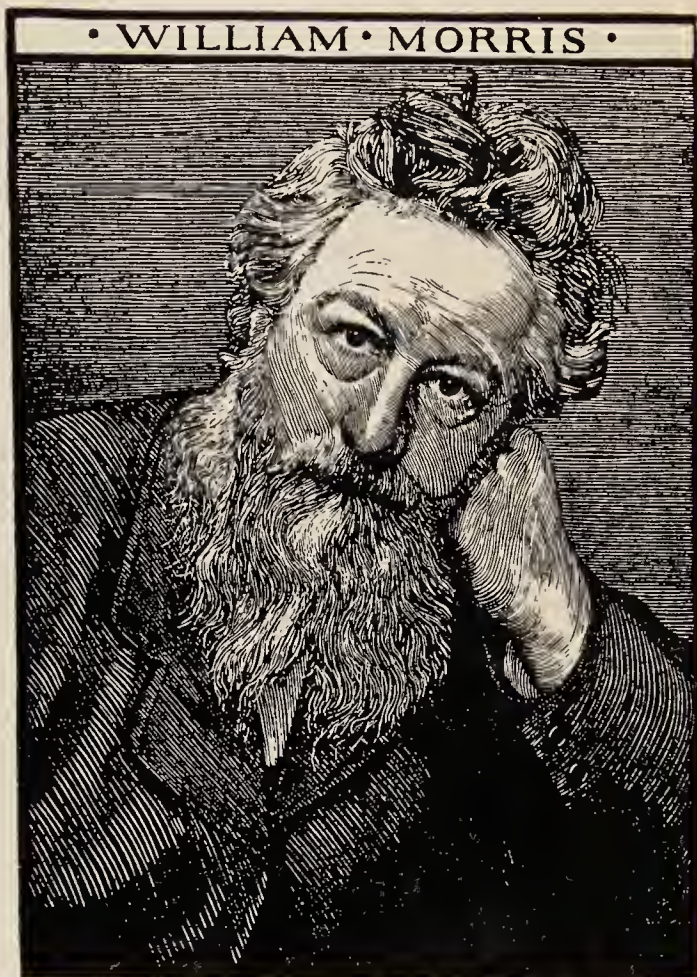


ever came from his hand, he combined two factors — his own creative genius and the best that he found in the similar products of the past. Therein lay his conservatism.

Although the idea of founding a press had evidently long been in his mind, it seems clear as we review the various activities of his life that, until those last years, the time was not yet ripe, for it is through his examples of fine printing, perhaps more than in any other way, that Morris was able to transmit to the world something of his own ideals; his own spontaneous, yet conservative, personality.

In the early sixties, Morris had taken up the study of woodcuts for the purpose of book illustration. In the next decade, he began to devote much time to the study of ancient illuminated service books, the results of which appeared in his exquisitely illuminated copies of Horace and Omar Khayyam. During the eighties, he had published several books at the Chiswick Press

in which he had tried to adapt the means at hand to the best possible use. Convinced that his ideal could not be achieved in this way, he set out to design his own type. "There was only one source," he wrote, in regard to the designing of his Golden Type, "from which to take the examples of this perfected Roman type, the works of the printers of the Fifteenth Century, of whom Nicolas Jenson produced the completest and most Roman characters from 1470 to 1476." So from photographic enlargements, Morris studied Jenson's type and redrew his designs until he mastered the essence of it. In 1889,



The portrait of William Morris reproduced above is from a wood-cut by R. Bryden, from *The Book-Lover*, May-June, 1902. The view of his library at Kelmscott House is from Mackail's *Life of William Morris*. The picture of the Kelmscott Press, on the title-page, is from *William Morris*, by Vallance.

he had begun a systematic collection of the best examples of the early printers' work in order that he might study the make-up and "build" more thoroughly than from the specimens of incunabula which he already possessed. It was from these books that he deduced his laws for fine printing — "letter pure in form; severe, without needless excrescences; solid, without the thickening and thinning of the line which is the essential fault of the ordinary modern type, and which makes it difficult to read; and not compressed laterally. As for margin, the inner always the narrowest, the top somewhat wider, the outside (fore-edge) wider still and the bottom widest of all, a rule never departed from in Mediaeval books, written or printed" — the technical side of which, Morris explains in great detail in his essay on "The Ideal Book."

The first printers had put into their books the best that they had found in the bookmaking of the past. To the manuscript makers and the skilled illuminators, therefore, is due the grace and vigor in the type designed by the best of the early printers and in the type — similar, although somewhat modified in form — which appears in the best of modern books. From them, we inherit the desire to give to the printed page that evenness of color and regularity of spacing for which they strove in painstaking hand labor. And to them we owe the idea, perhaps greatest of all, that the two pages of the open book are a unit in which a well proportioned margin should surround the blocks of type — so that the hand holding the book may not soil the text.

The paper used in the Kelmscott paper-copies was made expressly for Morris, hand woven from linen rags and successfully modelled, after much experimentation, upon a Bolognese paper of about 1473. It is fine grained, fairly thin yet tough, and it has a clean, pleasant feeling to the hand. According to its grade or size, it was water-marked with a conventional primrose, a perch bearing a spray, or an apple — each water-mark supported by the initials "W" and "M." Morris intended to make his own ink in course of time, and it is very probable that he would have accomplished this also if his death had not brought his work so suddenly to a close.

The first Kelmscott book, which appeared in the spring of 1891, was in the Golden Type, the Roman fount which Morris based upon his study of Jenson. Before the end of the year, another fount was ready for use. This was Gothic, based upon the type of the early German printers, notably Schoeffer, Zainer and Koberger; and called the Troy, from the title of the first book in which it appeared. Within a few years this Troy Type was re-cast in a fount of smaller size and used in the sumptuous folio of 1896, issued only a short time before Morris's death — the Chaucer, from which this small-sized Gothic type took its name.



Upon the title-pages of his books, Morris printed only such statements as referred directly to the subject matter, after the manner of the so-called "label-title" which came into being about 1490. The facts regarding the production of the book, the printer, place and date, nowadays contained generally in the imprint at the bottom of the title-page, Morris reserved for the end of the volume, like the colophons used by the manuscript makers and the early printers. The placing of these details, whether all on the title-page



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or divided into title-heading and colophon, is of course purely arbitrary. There is no absolute right or wrong in the matter. Yet much may be said for the logic of the latter arrangement.

One of the first to catch the spirit of Morris's venture was Mr. Charles Ricketts. Like Morris, Mr. Ricketts began his career as printer by trying to create beautiful books with the printers' outfit of the day, and like him he came to the conclusion that success could not be attained under conditions as they were. It was several years after Morris began to produce his Kelmescott books before Mr. Ricketts began to work out designs for a fount of his own. Between 1896 and 1904, when the last book from the so-called

Vale Press was issued, he designed three sets of type — the Vale, the Avon and the Kings founts. In his theory of type-design, however, Mr. Ricketts differed fundamentally from Morris. In the work of the early printers Morris saw the crystallization of the best that had been achieved by the manuscript makers from whom he likewise sought inspiration, and in his intense love for all that was Mediaeval he failed to realize that all might not share his passion. In Mr. Ricketts's type there is a boldness and a precision of outline not found in the Kelmscott books, for, as he himself has said, he conceived his types as forms cut in metal and in his study of the early printers' books he felt "that sense of logic, balance, and control which characterised the Renaissance itself."

Meanwhile, when the Kelmscott Press was broken up shortly after Morris's death, the Guild of Handicraft of which Mr. C. R. Ashbee was the leading spirit, purchased two of Morris's hand-presses. Up to that time the Guild had not included printing among its crafts, because in view of the work done by the Kelmscott and the Vale presses, Mr. Ashbee felt that a new attempt in that direction would seem almost "an impertinence," but when Morris died the possibility of a press presented itself in a new light. The first books issued at this new Essex House Press were in Caslon type. In 1901 and 1903, respectively, Mr. Ashbee's Endeavour and Prayer Book Types appeared, both of which adhere more closely to the characteristics of manuscript lettering than any other type designed during the "Revival."

In 1901, the first book was issued from the newly established Doves Press, founded by two of Morris's most intimate associates, Mr. T. J. Cobden-Sanderson and Mr. Emery Walker. The type which, like Morris's, was modelled after Jenson's has a certain luminous quality — a combination of delicacy and firmness which, both in type-design and in presswork, shows the hand of a master. Surrounding the text is a wealth of margin. In proportion it does not seem to differ materially from that used by all printers of beautiful books. It is seemingly more liberal because of the square octavo page characteristic of the Doves Press books, and its whiteness is emphasized by the gray block of text, unbroken by ornament, and embellished with only an occasional, simple initial-letter so carefully placed that the line of margin is undisturbed.

This press was founded "to attack the problem of pure Typography" and unfortunately, for booklovers, the notes of its death song have already sounded. Various masterpieces of literary thought have meanwhile been produced; for Mr. Cobden-Sanderson believes that "Whether by the Doves Press or some



other Press or Presses, such monumental production, expressive of man's admiration, is a legitimate ambition and a public duty."

Although not so frequently mentioned as some others, the name of Emery Walker should be among those most honored in the "Revival of Printing." It was to him, we are told, that Morris confided his ideals and hopes when opening his Press, and to him that Morris went for counsel, relying much upon his taste and sympathetic understanding of the project. As early as 1888, Mr. Walker published an essay on fine printing and he was one with Morris in the early attempt to print satisfactory books at the Chiswick Press. A year after he had entered into partnership with Mr. Cobden-Sanderson at the Doves Press, Mr. Walker it is said assisted in designing the exceedingly beautiful fount, based on Sweynheym and Pannartz, for Mr. Hornby's Ashendene Press at Chelsea — a press which has made an additional contribution in the happy combination of colored initials with printed text. And now we hear that Mr. Walker is about to embark on a new printing venture.

Another press which has come to take a prominent place in the "Revival of Printing" was started by Lucien Pissarro at Epping. Pissarro was originally a wood engraver of Eragny, Normandy, who took up the study of typography in the early nineties. In 1896, he began the publication of books in the Vale type, through the courtesy of Mr. Ricketts. Seven years later, together with his wife, he brought forth their first book in the Brook Type, "A Brief Account of the Origin of the Eragny Press." Naturally the possibility of decorating their books with woodcuts made a strong appeal. The quaint, personal quality of their illustrations and ornaments is often very attractive, especially in cases where the woodcuts are hand-colored.

In America, the first to feel the influence of the "Revival" were Mr. D. Berkeley Updike of the Merrymount Press, and Mr. Bruce Rogers who was at that time at the Riverside Press and is now about to combine with Mr. Walker in London. The names of both are frequently included among those of the printers of this school of private presses. Yet they may almost be said to have started a school of their own, for theirs was the happy faculty of absorbing the real essence of the "Revival" and of translating it at once into terms of commercial printing; with the result, that their books combine real charm with what is at the same time practicable in every sense of the word. The same might now be said of a score of other presses in America, and of equally conspicuous British houses, which have since applied the laws of fine printing to the regular trade and have bettered the product of their presses according to the measure of their success in understanding its principles. Like every movement of its kind, the "Revival of Printing" has

quam necessitatem fatum appellant. Sic omnia stellis attribuunt quos solos deos & fatorum dominos existimantes sacris et simulacris reliquosque deos cultu propitios sibi reddere conantur. Sic præter illa quæ in cælo uidetur alios deos Porphyrio etiã teste rheologia ægyptiorum nõ nouit: creatorem uero regum omnium non intellectum: non incorporeã quãdã substantiam: non uirtutem quãdam intellectuam: sed uisibilem hunc solem arbitratur. Ad stellas igitur omnia refert: & cuncta fatis idest stellarum motui & aspectibus attribuit: quæ opinio usque ad hæc tempora ab ægyptiis tanquam uera defenditur: quod si hæc uisibilia elementa mystica ægyptiorum theologia deos putat. hæc autem omnia animæ atque rationis expertia sunt: nec a corruptione omnino aliena. Attende diligenter ad quantam turpitudinem sublimis eorum theologia decidit: quæ ultra hæc nullum intellectum: nullam separatam substantiam pro causa regum cognouit. Verum quoniam ipsi quoque concedunt ab ægyptiis in grecos theologiam affluxisse: una cum ægyptiis greci etiam redarguuntur. Sed de his rebus idem Porphyrius huiusmodi uerba eo scripsit in libro quæ de abstinendo a carnibus animalium edidit. Ab hac peritia inquit ægyptii ad cognitionem dei profecti cognouerunt non ad hominem solummodo deum peruenisse: nec in hominibus animam solummodo habitasse: sed eandem animalia omnia continere. Quæ de re tam homines quam bestias serpentina simul atque uolatilia quædam in deos susceperunt & alius apud eos deus hominis collum: faciem alius: aliudque membrum alius inuenerit: & rursus alius in caput hominis: collum auis: ceteraque membra diuersorum animalium conformia possidet: quibus significant deorum sententia animalia complura cum inter se: tum maxime nobiscum amice uiuere: Vade leoni particula quædam ægypti dedicata leonina: alia uero quædam bouina alia canina nominatur: Virtutem eam quæ in omnibus hæis animalibus quæ a singulis deorum inuenta sunt colere statuerunt. Aquam uero atque ignem apprimè venerantur & in omnibus sacris adhibent: quia maxima salutis humanæ causa hæc elementa sunt. Quare ad hunc usque diem quomodo sanctissimum serapidis templum aperitur uniuersus cultus igne atque aqua peragitur: nam qui decantat hymnos aquam libat & ignem tunc ostendit: quando in uestibulo fixus ægyptiorum lingua deum exsuscitat. Ea uero animalia magis colunt quæ rebus sacris magis conueniunt: Nam et hominem apud arabum oppidum adorant: quare quemadmodum ab humanis carnibus abstinendum est: sic ab aliorum etiam animalium. hæc illi cumulatâ sapientia & diuinæ regum consuetudine quædam animalium magis quam homines a diis intellexerunt amari: quæ soli maxime consecrata putant: quia natura eorum sanguine & spiritu copiosissimo constet: et

of dialect to become fixed firmly on the national tongue, Caxton — not by introducing the printing press but by determining that the English press should disseminate works in the English language — performed a service of inestimable importance to English literature. That Caxton had a keen appreciation of good usage in language we know from his references to his efforts to improve his own vocabulary by finding out exactly what words mean and how they should be used. Born, as he acknowledges in his first publication, in a part of Kent where “I doubt not is spoken as broad and rude English as is in any place in Englonde,” and living for thirty years “for the most parte in the contres of Braband, Flandres, Holand, and Zeland,” he not unnaturally felt keenly his own lack of facility and accuracy in the use of his mother tongue. His own everyday speech may well have been a conglomerate of all the languages of northern Europe, commingled with some school Latin, with each of which he certainly had at least sufficient acquaintance to serve his purposes as merchant & traveller. What he could hardly have realised was that the English which he spoke had been influenced by personal experiences not unlike the race experiences which have given us the marvellously flexible and incomparably expressive language of English literature. ¶ Caxton was always ready for a discussion of the minutiae of literary usage, although as he remarks in the Blanchardin



attracted a host of followers, many of whom, seeing the truth underlying it all, are striving to achieve in spite of certain handicaps. Others, seeing merely the superficial, have caught at various characteristics and stereotyped them into meaningless convention.

The remarkable thing is that those presses which may properly be said to belong to the "Revival of Printing," besides following the laws deduced by their "master-printer," have each made some individual contribution to the movement. In this way, possibly more than in any other, is shown the power of Morris's influence. He looked to the Past for inspiration, and gaining it combined with it his own personality in his Kelmscott books. And through him as interpreter and guide, the printers of his school have been able not only to take the best from the Past and to carry out his ideals for the Book Beautiful, but to add to this heritage something of themselves.

Occasionally a few books belonging to the "Revival" appear in an auction room or are listed in a bookseller's catalogue. A certain number are recorded annually in Slater, Karslake and American Book-Prices Current. Not many copies are on the market, however, because the books were issued in limited edition and many of them are still on the shelves of their original purchasers. The prices which these books command, although not as yet prohibitive, raise them above the reach of the average buyer and give them place in the libraries of those booklovers who have sufficient means to rank as collectors.

The public library, striving to meet demands for the latest books on the War, and for up-to-date works of science and economics, can hardly be expected to devote even a portion of its income to the purchase of books whose value to the public is more as works of art than for actual utility. Yet, if the library is to fulfill its function of making available to the public the knowledge of the great achievements in the world's development, it needs these books. It must rely, then, upon the generosity of its friends.

Fortunately, in our own case, several of the finest specimens among the books of the "Revival" have already found their way to our shelves, but their number is very few.

It is not possible nor desirable for the printer at the commercial press to live up to the rather fastidious standards of the "Revival" itself. The type designed for these presses, for instance, is beautiful when examined letter by letter, but on the full page printed without leading and with little space between the words, as is characteristic of the majority of their books, it cannot be read with ease. The use of a small leaf or ornament between sentences to mark a change in thought and yet avoid breaking the text into paragraphs,



which has rather aptly been described as a "glorified full-stop," gives an even tone of color to the page which is pleasing enough in itself. In continuous reading, the eye becomes wearied of the unbroken pages and longs for the occasional short line and the space at the end of the paragraph. And again, the elaborate initial letters and ornamental borders which adorn many of these books are graceful in design and admirably executed, though hardly suited to the subject matter or character of the average books of today. Morris printed Mediaeval subjects in a Mediaeval way, which was most fitting, but any one of his charming ornamental initials printed by machinery and interjected into a modern page of Caslon would be anything but appropriate.

It is such peculiarities, however, which first strike the eye as it surveys the books of the "Revival," and which appeal as strongly to the dilettante as they rebuff the more practically minded. The dilettante snatches at these superfluities and copies them until they lose whatever of beauty and meaning they originally possessed. The other rejects the books *en masse* and, without seeing beyond the surface, condemns them as specimens of a passing fad. Whereas, back of it all there are certain laws of book-building which these books exemplify and it is these laws re-discovered and practised by the "Revival" which have had so striking an influence upon modern bookmaking.

Individual letters of pure form, grouped in words which are separated by enough space to be quite distinct from one another; ink, in full black, carefully distributed, and printed with even impression; paper of good quality; sufficient margin to set off the text; illustrations or ornaments not incongruous with the subject matter and so placed that the harmony and balance of the two pages of the open book are not destroyed — these are the hallmarks of a book well printed. These are laws which apply to every book — whether printed from specially designed type on hand-made paper, or in linotype on commercial paper.

Swift's "Advice to Grub-Street Writers,"

"Get all your verses printed fair,  
Then let them well be dried,  
And Curll must have a special care  
To leave the margin wide,"

is all very well so far as it goes. It leads rather to Dibdin's love for "tall copies" than to the real truth of the matter. It is not the width of the margin which makes a book attractive. It is its proportionate width. It must not be so narrow in proportion to the text that the book has a cropped and shorn appearance. On the other hand, it must not be so wide that the text seems

lost in a mass of over-conspicuous white. There is a happy mean between these two extremes, and it is only when this point is reached that real beauty is attained.

The laws of symmetry, balance and rhythm underly all art and one or more are essential in the make-up of every object which is truly beautiful. In book-building the application of these laws is perhaps not so obvious as in some forms of art, yet nevertheless they obtain here as elsewhere — symmetry, in exactness of arrangement and in accurate spacing; balance, in the nice arrangement of text and margin, so that the two pages of the open book form an artistic whole; and rhythm in the even impression of type and harmonious relation between the type and whatever of ornament or illustration the book contains, so that as the leaves are turned, page by page, the effect is that of a harmonious mass of gray set in relief by the surrounding white of the margins.

Whether Morris created the spirit of our time or whether he was himself the product of his time, it would be hard to determine, especially from so close a perspective. That the yeast was already at work we know. DeVinne and William Blades had long been writing upon the history of typography. On the Continent, a similar interest was manifest. Ruskin and Oscar Wilde had earnestly sought Truth and Simplicity as the essence of Beauty. Other printers, besides Morris, had tried to apply these principles to book-building and had been confronted with the unyielding methods of commercial printing in the late nineteenth century. But it was Morris who first dared to brush aside these conditions and to go to the root of the matter for himself.

Whatever its cause, dating from about 1900, a change seems gradually to have come over the spirit of our printing. Beauty may be found not only among the sumptuous books issued by booklovers' societies and clubs, but in those from the majority of English and American publishing houses, not to mention similar specimens of fine printing published outside these two countries. We rarely see the cheap octavo with its cramped and oftentimes blurred type printed on inferior paper, which in its day served the purpose of making good literature available at a small cost. Today, our publishing houses find it possible to give us, at a low figure, books of a clear, readable type, well spaced and evenly printed upon paper of a considerably better grade. Instead of books illustrated, we have illustrated books and there is as wide a chasm between the artistic value of these terms as the distance between the poles. Instead of half-tones on dissimilar paper, line-cut drawings are often used. Even in our passing books of fiction, the text is surrounded by a pleasing width of margin. Not infrequently the margins at the outer sides and bottom

are a bit wider than at the top above the running title — and even the fraction of an inch added to the space below the text adds grace and beauty to the printed page.

It was William Morris who maintained, after studying the works of the master printers, that a book to be beautiful must be “architectural” in its build. It is undoubtedly to the influence of his Kelmscott books, and of those produced by the printers of the subsequent “Revival of Printing,” that we owe much of the improved appearance of our books today. These private presses, through years of endeavor, produced books which are the modern exponent of the best that had been achieved in the history of printing. The commercial printer had only to study their methods and to adopt whatever he found feasible, if he would raise the standard of his press. And now it remains to be seen just what will be the outcome of this new venture in fine printing, by Mr. Emery Walker and Mr. Bruce Rogers.







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